

2012

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Recommended Citation

Gaetz, Ivan (2012) "Thick and Thin Library Collaboration," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29087/2012.4.3.01>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol4/iss3/1>

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Thick and Thin Library Collaboration

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Collaboration of most any kind, it seems, usually is driven by practicalities, and perhaps by necessity. In the library world, collaborative partnerships commonly arise because there are cost savings, efficiencies or expanded services to be realized, and sometimes collaboration becomes necessary in order even to survive. While these matters tend to be the drivers of collaboration, are there ways to understand more deeply and more theoretically the nature of library collaboration? Can a theoretical basis for collaboration help us determine why we say “yes” to collaboration, and why we say “no,” or perhaps say “maybe later”? Are there guiding lights for this? I have been reading again the little book, *Thick and Thin*, by social philosopher, Michael Walzer. Although his main focus is on moral theory and its social ramifications, I think his insights could help us better understand library collaboration.

According to Walzer, to put it simply (and perhaps simplistically), moral commitments and discourse tend to be related either to universal principals or imperatives (thin considerations), or related to a particular historical or social concerns (thick considerations). Thin considerations have minimalist meaning and stem from broadly based or universal conceptions while thick concerns are adapted to local, historical contexts that carry maximalist meaning. These two metaphors, thin and thick, pertain to how widely or narrowly are the contexts and the applications. I wonder how this theory may be applied to the field of collaboration.

One possible way to apply thick and thin would be in terms of understanding library collaborations in their different modes. Collaboration often is not “yes” or “no,” “on” or “off,” “in” or “out” propositions. There are gradations and modes of collaboration depending on the nature of partnerships a library has, or on the nature of a project or program. Given this paradigm, thin library collaborations would be those that cover

a broad range of library matters, loosely managed and usually centered on some general principle of libraries working together. These types of collaboration often do not mean a great deal of financial commitment and they tend to be wide-spread geographically or programmatically. Being simply a member of a large consortium or participating in a broad interlibrary loan service would be two examples of thin collaboration. Thick collaborations would be those that are designed and carefully developed for a well-defined purpose. There often is significant financial commitment by participating members and deeper involvement of library personnel in creating, managing, and assessing a particular program. Certain types of consortial purchases may be described as thick library collaboration, especially where significant budgets are earmarked for group purchases. Other examples would be joint projects, such as developing shared open source computing systems, or participating in joint service programs.

All of this, of course, begs a question. What good is it to have such a theoretical framework? In my experience, libraries attempting to work together on programs or services occasionally fail to appreciate the complexity of the collaborative environment, thinking perhaps that one size fits all, or that libraries are either collaborative or they are not. Understanding that there are local exigencies as well and broader considerations that need to be taken into account could help libraries allow for a variety of instances and levels of collaboration. Perhaps you might think of other ways a theoretical framework for understanding collaboration might aid in understanding library partnerships and promote the actual practice of collaboration that is driven by theory rather than solely by the pragmatic. To be sure, these few thoughts are not a complete or substantial treatment of the theory of collaboration, but rather merely a few passing reflections, with thanks to Michael Walzer, on the nature and nuances of library collaboration.

We are pleased to present in this issue of *Collaborative Librarianship* a set of articles and reviews that cover both thin and thick modes of collaboration. Bascones' account of the Post-Cancellation Entitlement Registry Scoping Project, as a "thin" example, deals with the wide concern with access and publication rights on national and even international fronts. At the other end of the scale, the Beisler and Kurt article provides an in-depth treatment of an interdepartmental process within one large academic library that provides access to e-book materials. Each deals with access issues, but with very different modes of collaboration. As partly thin and partly thick, the Thomas piece offers a review and analysis of interlibrary loan data of an expanded network of resource sharing for consortium libraries in western Colorado. Being a broad-based project, understanding ILL data helps the local library prepare for and balance workload that ultimately enhances services to users.

As another case of hybrid, thick and thin, collaboration, our new columnist, Lori Ayer, Principal Consultant with The Galecia Group based in California writes about the need for ILS vendors to provide data interchange protocols for their local systems. This will enable libraries to authenticate users and circulate materials beyond the domain of the integrated library system.

Two reviews again represent thick and thin types of collaboration. In thick mode, the book on libraries and international students encourages academic libraries to forge partnerships with other units of its institution in order to serve better their students from abroad and enhance the learning experience. In thin mode, the World Digital Library collects and provides free access to a vast array of digital resources from around the world.

Collaborative Librarianship invites your participation in this thinly and thickly conceived venture. Consider submitting articles and reviews, or joining our team of peer reviews, or registering as a reader—all done through the website. Thanks to our terrific team of editors, technical experts, managers and reviewers for their work in advancing library collaboration of all kinds.

